

Against the Grain

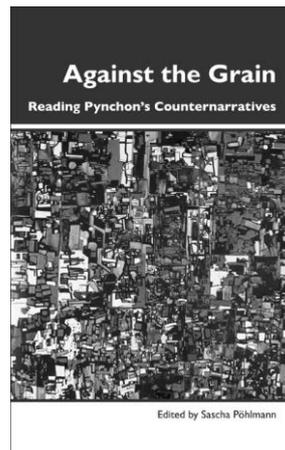
Reading Pynchon's Counternarratives

Edited by Sascha Pöhlmann

Against the Grain: Reading Pynchon's Counternarratives is the first book that critically addresses Thomas Pynchon's novel *Against the Day*, published in 2006. The nineteen essays collected in this volume employ a large variety of approaches to this massive novel and also take it as an opportunity to reevaluate Pynchon's earlier works, analyzing *Against the Day* in relation to *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Vineland*, *Mason & Dixon*, and Pynchon's short stories and essays. The authors—younger as well as established scholars from eleven countries—address these works with regard to issues of modernism and postmodernism, politics, popular culture, concepts of space and time, visuality, sexuality, identity, media and communication, philosophy, religion, American and global (literary) history, physics, mathematics, economics, and many more. Their insights are as profound as they are diverse, and all provide fresh views on Pynchon's fiction that will be useful, fascinating and entertaining for researchers and fans alike.

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Fluid Destiny: Memory and Signs in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*

Manlio Della Marca

Abstract: This essay reads Thomas Pynchon's postmodern novel *The Crying of Lot 49* "against the light" of Marx and Bauman's "melting visions." It seems to me a stimulating perspective which might enable us to see *The Crying of Lot 49* as only a few frames of a much longer movie, a point on that line of Western thought which, from Marx through Benjamin to Bauman, has tried to depict the collateral effects of modern capitalism, the wounds inflicted by modernization, next to the positive aspects of progress. It is within this larger framework that I want to show how focusing on the solid/fluid dialectic might open up new ways of looking at *The Crying of Lot 49*. On the one hand, I will try to chart how, throughout the book, the play of memory is at the center of a force field shaped by the solid/fluid tension. On the other hand, I will show how Pynchon's story might be read as a semiotic reflection on the value of the almost completely dissolved, fluctuating signs of postmodern America.

*"All That Is Solid Melts into Air"*¹

All That Is Solid Melts into Air is the title of a compelling book on modernization by Marshall Berman; at the same time "[a]ll rusted relations [...] dissolve away [...]. All that is solid melts into air" is a quotation from the heart of the *Communist Manifesto* which in the original German reads: "Alle festen eingerosteten Verhältnisse [...] werden aufgelöst [...]. Alles Ständische und Stehende verdampft."² By using this image of evaporation, Marx and Engels not only managed to grasp the spirit of modern capitalism, but they also foreshadowed some of the features to come of the postmodern, late capitalist societies we have been living in for the past few decades.³ No wonder sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, in *Liquid Modernity*, after reminding us that fluidity is a distinguishing quality of gases and liquids, argues that the crucial feature of the present phase of modernity is the transformation from solid societies into fluid—or

liquid—societies (1-2). In Bauman’s analysis, the transition towards postmodernity has so far been primarily a traumatic, disorienting shift from a heavy, solid, hardware-focused modernity to a light, fluid, software-based one (*Liquid Modernity* 113, 116, 198, 200).

I do not think that it is old-fashioned Marxism to consider the economy as one of the leading forces shaping history, and I would thereby like to reconnect *The Crying of Lot 49* to its moment and place of production. Therefore, much as I admire Patrick O’Donnell’s introduction to the collection of essays on *The Crying of Lot 49* he edited, I can only partially agree with him when he argues that “it would be a mistake to assume that there is any definitive connection to be made between ‘fiction’ and ‘history’ [...]” (1). Pynchon’s second novel is set—and was published—in the volatile atmosphere of 1960s America, “a transition point” (*SL* 7) when the economic (and cultural) configurations which had lasted for decades started to melt into the late capitalist, postmodern, liquid environment depicted by Bauman and prefigured by Marx. An understanding of this is a prerequisite to grasp the affinity many contemporary readers feel for Oedipa and Mucho. In fact, most of the disorienting features of modernization experienced by Pynchon’s characters are the same we find ourselves dealing with today, only on a much greater scale.

In the following pages, I will try to read Thomas Pynchon’s postmodern novel *The Crying of Lot 49* “against the light” of Marx and Bauman’s “melting visions.”⁴ It seems to me a stimulating perspective which might enable us to see *The Crying of Lot 49* as only a few frames of a much longer movie, a point on that line of Western thought which, from Marx through Benjamin to Bauman, has tried to depict the collateral effects of modern capitalism, the wounds inflicted by modernization, next to the positive aspects of progress. What should not be overlooked is that, perhaps because of the inevitable melancholy implicit in any critique of modernity, the critical visions of modernization developed by Marx, Benjamin, Bauman and Pynchon follow a trajectory essentially different from—but sometimes edging dangerously close to—those of many reactionary writers and thinkers.

Alongside this transnational (and transhistorical) perspective, however, the quintessentially American nature of Pynchon’s melting vision should not be swept aside. As O’Donnell reminds us:

The struggle between fluidity and form in the construction of the self has been one Richard Poirier, in several books including *A World Elsewhere* and *The Performing Self*, has located within the specific historical progressions of classical American and modern literature. Pynchon, according to Poirier, is part of this tradition of progression, a descendent of Hawthorne, Emerson and Melville in his projection of a vision of “cultural inundation, of being swamped, swept up [...]” (11)

It is within the larger framework suggested so far that I want to show how focusing on the solid/fluid dialectic might open up new ways of looking at *The Crying of Lot 49*. On the one hand, I will try to chart how, throughout the book, the play of memory is at the center of a force field shaped by the solid/fluid tension. On the other hand, I will show how Pynchon’s story might be read as a semiotic reflection on the value of the almost completely dissolved, fluctuating signs of postmodern America.

The Melting Vision

Before discussing how the solid/fluid dialectic and the theme of memory intertwine in *The Crying of Lot 49*, I would like to gloss the idea of the “melting vision.” Let us begin by looking at the entire sentence from the *Manifesto* I referred to before: “All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real condition of life, and his relations with his kind” (7). As Marshall Berman points out, “Marx’s second clause, which proclaims the destruction of everything holy, is more complex and more interesting than the standard nineteenth-century materialist assertion that God does not exist” (89). According to Berman, “Marx is [...] working to evoke an ongoing historical drama and trauma. He is saying that the aura of holiness is suddenly missing and that we cannot understand ourselves in the present until we confront what is absent” (89). If we agree with Berman’s reading of the *Manifesto*, it is Marx’s tormented sensibility, his conception of history as a melting process—a dramatic, disorienting, endless change driven by capitalism—that bridges the gap between his era and ours, making us perceive him as our contemporary.

It seems to me that Marx’s melting vision expresses an attitude towards modernization very similar to that of Bauman and Pynchon. Many of Pynchon’s characters, like us, inhabit a world where “all that